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Two Members of the Family: Henri-Pierre Roché and Jean Suquet

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REFERENCES

Roché, Henri-Pierre. *Ecrits sur l'art*, Marseille : André Dimanche éd., 1998

Suquet, Jean. *Marcel Duchamp ou l'éblouissement de l'éclaboussure*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 1998

- 1 They are two “transparent,” as Octavio Paz would say; two “laughers,” I would say. One is Henri-Pierre Roché, of the same generation as his friend Marcel Duchamp, departed from the land of the living for forty years now, the author of *Jules et Jim* and *Deux anglaises et le continent*, on whom François Truffaut would confer a certain notoriety by adopting him (for fathers can also be adopted). The other is Jean Suquet, still very much alive and still laughing, a reporter-photographer as he defines himself, having devoted his eye and pen since the very beginning to the apprehension of the work of Marcel Duchamp.¹ What’s funny is that all three resemble each other physically. Not only in their shared concern for elegance, with the necessary dose of the *casual*, but even in the features of these three very sophisticated faces, ironic yet empty of malice, disabused and attentive. It’s a family thing.
- 2 I said that Suquet has devoted himself to the “apprehension” of Duchamp’s work: now there’s a vulgar term, which sounds foreign to the family! Precisely: what I’ve always admired in Suquet is his art of speaking about Duchamp in a familiar yet distant way, at once respectful and erudite, but without saddling up the steeds of high philosophy or unbridled esoterics, whose favor certain critics, in two distinct schools, still believe themselves obliged to curry when they hitch themselves up to the latter’s work. Of course, we’re all astounded upon approaching that singular genius: what fascinated disarray takes hold of you when you first open the *Green Box* and find yourself holding 99

pieces of paper in various sizes, with their edges carefully torn, all rearrangeable, since they're lying disordered in the box!² Suquet says it in his own way: "I was wonderstruck (...) by the freedom that this resurgence of writings offered me (...) I dispersed the manuscripts in a rustling disorder on my table and I rifled through them with a slightly trembling hand, the way you would pillage a treasure chest, the way you caress woolen cloths, silks, even nylon, in the half-light of a gaping closet." (p. 82)

3 One day in 1949 Suquet received a commission from André Breton, who thrust upon him the solicitation he had just received from K press.³ Suquet responded.

4 The (almost) newest book by Suquet, after eight others, has been published by L'Harmattan under the title *Duchamp ou l'éblouissement de l'éclaboussure*. It is the one I prefer, in all its apparent simplicity, for it reprints all the little talks he has delivered before the most diverse audiences. The author's fifty-year familiarity with Duchamp resurfaces here with the wealth of knowledge that is only brought by a long impregnation. One can never be admiring enough of his sure information, and of the self-deprecating humor of his erudition. Thus we have in our hands the most effective of guides, able to introduce us to a universe at once closed and wildly inventive. This inventiveness is contagious in all directions. Metaphors and tongue-twisters are practiced like a second nature by Suquet, a lucky find every time. Just fishing by chance I discover: "*une roue de vélo mieux que moi fera la route*". It's the great turning-point in Duchamp's adventure that is designated here: that of 1912, when he took his distances from "olfactory" painting and invented

the ready-made. In the most recent of the works that he so rarely releases (a publication by the Society of Invisible Artists, at the Marcel Duchamp College in Châteauroux), Suquet proposes that it is finally in terms of *esoterotism* that one should attempt to define Duchamp's approach. Esoterotism: the eroticism of language, games of the tongue, conjoined with a kind of relational nostalgia that takes account of affinities without condescending to take "possession" of the other.

5 And here's another *laugher*: H.-P. Roché, to whom F. Truffaut, the filmmaker, and later A. Dimanche, the publisher, attached themselves as to a seductive brother. Dimanche gave flesh to the itinerary and the exigency of Roché, who before him had remained a legend, an elf or a failure. Already Dimanche had published two volumes: the first in 1990, signed H.-P. Roché, reprinting the terms of the autobiographical *Carnets* (1920-1921) preserved at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Houston, Texas; the second, in 1991, is the *Journal* of Helen Hessel, the Jeanne Moreau of Truffaut's film *Jules et Jim*, containing the text of her letters addressed during the same two years to H.-P. Roché.

6 By Roché, under the same bright red cover, we now have the *Ecrits sur l'art*, for which we can thank the precise and concise knowledge of Serge Fauchereau. Shall we call it a critical work? The paradox is that one ends up thinking *yes*: by way of anecdote, personal anthology, and the most intense subjectivity, one enters the fabric of a period, its tastes and distastes, its famous collections and its no-doubt irreparable losses. We read of his persistent taste for the work of women-painters (Marie Laurencin, of whom he was the first collector, but also Hélène Perdriat and Mina Loy); his irrepressible need to generously associate his talent as a "beholder" with that of quality collectors such as the American John Quinn; his unfailing friendship – with Picasso, Gertrude Stein, and above all Marcel Duchamp, from whom he became inseparable as early as the New York years.

7 All these jottings, though sometimes repetitive, bring a singular note to the movements and the mobility of this century's art. For instance, we know that Kandinsky was an

excellent violinist. But who else will tell us that “he sung baritone and spoke almost tenor”? Who else will stress how difficult a painter he is for a Latin mind, Kandinsky who came from Mongolia to Moscow, and from there to Weimar and Paris? Far from anecdotes, these ingenuous remarks, without pretensions, transform a score that one expected to be difficult to read into an unforgettable concert, where great masses of sound suddenly stand out to enchant us.

NOTES

1. The only book by Jean Suquet not directly related to the work of Marcel Duchamp, but which gathers letters by the author, photographs, montages, and delicious texts, was published in 1996 by Liard, in Bordeaux. Highly recommended!
2. A disarray smoothed over by *Marchand du sel* (edited by Michel Sanouillet), Paris: Flammarion. A useful volume, which cannot help betraying that aspect of the work.
3. One will recall the article “Phare de la mariée,” *Minotaure*, 1934.